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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses information gateways and equal access to information. Highlights include: the development of the physical infrastructure of libraries; globalization as it relates to the use of software; Internet controls such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act; the psycho-social component of libraries; computer literacy and languages as essential tools for children to learn; the role of librarians; disparities between elite schools and poor schools in Thailand; the information technology gap between nations; an enlightened society as a learning society and libraries as gateways to knowledge sources; and actions focusing on equal access to information. (MES)

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Reaching The Information Gateways : An Unfinished Task

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Abstract

With a staggering number of books and written materials coming out of the press everyday, libraries all over the world, large or small, public or specialized, surely have to find alternative ways of coping with the information deluge, while keeping in view the demands of the clientele. If a library intends to serve as a change agent, it has to constantly change its role from being a mere depository of books to a reservoir of knowledge which is essential for an individual to make informed judgements, and for sharpening a human mind.

A wealth of information is available via various modes of information and data processing. Some of us have certainly crossed over the information gateways, while many others are still struggling to reach them. Hence the question of access to information. Moreover, we must be aware that the current trend in the information era marginalizes the have-nots more and more. There must be an honest sensitivity of all concerned, particularly policy makers, to the needs of the unreached, otherwise the continued marginalization will widen the gap and seriously affect national development efforts, and a nation's place in the international arena.

Apart from the obvious demands to improve the physical infrastructures, the psycho-social component has to be taken into account, i.e., efforts must be made to promote the willingness of children and adults to go into information technology systems with confidence and enthusiasm. This calls for intensive education and training.

Libraries must make it their mission to reach the currently unreached population, thus contributing to develop an egalitarian society. Most important of all, the ultimate goal of libraries is to turn data and information into knowledge, and to ensure that such knowledge serves as a source of wisdom. Only then can we expect the 21st century to usher in an era of

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an "enlightened" world

Paper

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The invitation extended to me by Khunying Maenmas Chavalit, President of the National Organizing Committee responsible for this Conference, presented me with a challenging task. I must admit that the thought of addressing an audience of library and information experts from all over the world was indeed daunting, since I am merely a user of the final product, with limited knowledge of the theoretical and technical processing of information. Nevertheless, I am a staunch advocate of the reading habit, of self-acquiring of knowledge, and of life-long learning, and therefore I take this opportunity to share with you my concepts on libraries, and my views on the roles of information and communication in the future. To perform effectively in the business world, the "demand and supply" theory is an essential guideline. Likewise, in the world of information and communication, the expectations and needs of consumers have to be taken into account in charting the path of information development.

Looking back into the past, humankind has evolved its communication mode from the primeval body language to the ancient oral tradition, to the book culture, and now to the domain of information technology. One of the most significant events of the 20th century was no doubt the invention of the computer. A decade or so ago, we claimed to be on the threshold of a new world - a global village where time and distance had taken on new concepts. Consequently, we cannot discuss the new role of libraries without examining the effect and implications of the advancement of information technology.

We are all aware that communication techniques refer not only to tools and procedures, but also to knowledge, content and symbols required for reading, renewing or transmitting information. When all these technologies are harnessed in support of information collection, storage, retrieval and dissemination, they can have a significant potential to enhance life-long learning, in terms of quality and quantity. They possess the potential to have an impact on poverty eradication, sustainable development, and in bringing about social equity.

The number of books and written materials coming out of the press and other media continues to increase day by day, which inevitably means that readers have to be more selective and discerning. Likewise, libraries all over the world, large or small, public or private, must find alternative ways of coping with the information deluge, while keeping in constant view the demands of the clientele. To serve as a change agent, libraries have to change their role constantly form being a mere depository of books to being not only a reservoir of knowledge, which is essential for an individual to make informed judgement and for sharpening a human mind, but also a facilitator of the proficiencies to select the required information out of the deluge.

When one considers ways to support the development of libraries, the most obvious concern is the physical infrastructure. The problems related to space, acquisition of books and hardware items, design of hardware and software, repair and maintenance, replacement of outdated machines, lack of power supply, etc., continue to plague all types of libraries.

Furthermore, the current trend seems to suggest that books will increasingly be replaced by computer elements processed by various types of software. The effect of globalization is quite strong when it comes to the use of software programmes developed extra-nationally. The development of indigeneous software is a demanding task, requiring time, skill and funding, but it is a task that must be seriously considered, in order to safeguard against intrusive foreign cultures, particularly when they affect the young minds, and more so, national cultural

identity. After all, technology in use is not simply machines and hardware, but also a collection of transferred attitudes, values, social norms and beliefs. Cultural pollution has already become a phenomenon of serious concern in many countries.

Let us consider the Internet as a concrete example. When we mention Internet, we think of the vast quantity of information available in an instant from all corners of the globe. It is perhaps the largest knowledge and information base in the world today. Internet is certainly a jungle of wonders, from which we can acquire information at our own discretion. On the other hand, Internet is also a jungle of hazards, where there is no control on pornography, propaganda, advertisement, violence, crime. A recent example was the case of students learning from the Internet how to make bombs which killed a number of adults and teenagers at their own schools in the U.S.A. Then there have been cases of misuse of the Internet to get information from children for illegal purposes. I was glad to read from a newspaper recently that in the U.S.A. the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act will become law in the year 2000. This will forbid advertisers to receive personal information from children less than 13 years old without offline parental permission. Controls on the Internet are possible, but, as has been shown in countries that have applied these controls, the balance between control and freedom to obtain information is a very sensitive one.

Apart from the question of hardware and software essential for user-friendly library services, the psycho-social component has to be taken into account. If a library is to be completely computerized, then efforts must be made to promote the willingness of children and adults to go into information technology with confidence and enthusiasm. This calls for intensive education and training, both for producers and users of information. Otherwise what is the use of having sophisticated technologies which people are hesitant to use, either because they are too complicated to handle, or the products do not meet the requirements of the users? There is a recognized need to instruct users how to cope with tools for searching for information. In some countries, this is still a transitional period when both the old and new skills are competing for limited instructional opportunities.

While on this subject, let me digress a little and mention that, with the globalization and advancement of information technology, I believe that our educational direction and effort should be geared towards equipping our children with the essential tools for survival in the future world. Among these tools are computer literacy and languages. Since English is currently the most common computer language, proficiency in English must be stressed.

However sophisticated the machines and electronic processing methods are, they will become valuable only when they are put to good use by the human component of the information set-up. Hence librarians must play a dynamic and catalytic role. The must be sensitive to the needs of their specific groups of clientele, be they the public, the institution or organization staff, the teaching cadre and students in colleges and schools. This calls for full involvement of librarians in the planning and operational aspects of the set-up, so that work of librarians not only reflects the immediate needs of the users, but also a forecast of what is to come. For example, when a school curriculum is to be refocused on, let us say, environment, teachers and students should be able to gather information ahead of time on the subject, which means that the librarian must start acquiring materials and software on environment prior to the actual implementation of the curriculum. Unfortunately I have heard complaints from librarians that they are sometimes isolated from the decision-making process of institutions, as if they can function in any direction they like, and not as information support to on-going or future undertakings. That will not do. Librarians must take part in conferences and seminars where plans and programmes are initially discussed and developed. How can any decision be made without proper information base? At the same time, every effort and provision should be made to encourage librarians to undergo regular training and attend refresher courses to update their knowledge and skills to keep up with the latest accesses to information. Surely the caretakers of the various information gateways must be kept alert and ready to usher in those who pass through the threshold of the information sphere.

I am sure all of us here still recall vividly our school and college days when libraries were essential and indispensable study rooms where we spent long hours searching and digesting information. Without libraries, we would not have been exposed to scientific knowledge, artistic work and philosophical thoughts, and the visions and wisdom of great minds. People of my generation had library books as tools for learning, but my grandchildren's generation is more fortunate to have a variety of electronic tools to access information.

While appreciating the good fortune that enabled me to recognize the full value of libraries, I often ask myself the question: How many others are not so fortunate? Let me take Thai children as examples. Although nowadays a much larger number of students make good use of libraries, thanks to the government and private-sector efforts to set up libraries both in the urban and rural areas, often I noticed that the books and materials remained almost too neatly arranged on shelves, with very few being used. Worse still, some schools are still lacking space and funds for setting up book corners, let alone proper libraries. When it comes to information technology, the disparities between elite schools and poor schools are quite vast and increasing. The trend appears to marginalize the latter more and more, which in fact means marginalizing the poor evenmore. This must surely disturb us, as we strive for social justice and equity, and as we advocate participatory democracy across the nation. The more this disparity increases, the more knowledge becomes monopolized by the minority "non-poor", and the capacity of the poor for wholesome participatory decision-making is correspondingly denuded.

The picture is even more dismal when we consider the Asian and Pacific region as a whole, where the population is almost 3.3 billion, or 54.5 percent of the world's total population (1). In terms of geography, culture, population density and income distribution, it is a region of sharp contrasts, a home to over two-thirds of the world's poor, with 620 million illiterates, or 70 percent of the world's total illiterates (2). With such socio-economic, cultural and educational deficiencies, any effort to improve the quality of the people must be encouraged, and this certainly includes the active role of libraries in opening up the knowledge horizon, especially among the young.

Concern must also be expressed, as within countries, of the dangers of marginalizing whole nations as the information technology gap widens among them.

Every time I hear people in urban areas talk about the Internet, E-mail and faxes, I cannot help but think of a large number of those who do not have access even to conventional telephone services. Governments in least-developed and developing countries are still dependent on outside resources to improve their information and communication technologies. Even whithin a country, these technologies may widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Hence the question of access and equity cannot be ignored. It is an established fact that those equipped with information technologies exert more economic, cultural and political power over those without, since knowledge is power, and those with better knowledge are likely to survive in this highly competitive world.

A wealth of information is available via various modes of information and data processing. Today information technologies greatly facilitate libraries to ensure that the content of information meets the real needs of the consumers in terms of timeliness, relevance and utility. Those making use of libraries have recognized that behind the information gateways lie multiple paths to knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment. Some of us have passed through some of these gateways, while several others are unfortunately struggling to reach them, due to both internal and external circumstances and limitations. There must be an honest sensitivity of all concerned, particularly policy makers, to the need of the unreached, otherwise the continued marginalization will widen the gap and seriously affect national development efforts, and a nation's place in the international arena.

The main theme of this Conference mentions an "enlightened" world. Although the concept of "enlightenment" may seem rather Utopian, it is worth striving towards it. To me an

enlightened society must first and foremost be a learning society, where people are eager to become wiser through the search for proper knowledge. This is by no means an easy task. Several gateways towards knowledge sources are available, among them libraries. Still, it is the will of human beings that spurs them on to reach those gateways. Perhaps the very first step would be to develop a critical reading and listening culture, to encourage the young to ask questions and get correct answers, to think for themselves and apply what they have learnt to improve the quality of life. Some pockets of society may be more "enlightened" than others. It is the unreached that should be the focus for development actions, and the target of library service planning.

Several tasks remain to be done, and must be done quickly to narrow the chasm between the influx of information and the transmittal and spreading of information. All actions should focus on equal access to information, which is the right of citizen. Libraries must make it their mission to reach the currently unreached population, thus contributing towards the development of an egalitarian society. Most important of all, the ultimate goal of libraries is to turn data and information into knowledge, and to ensure that such knowledge serves as a source of wisdom; for without wisdom there is no enlightenment. Only then can we expect the 21st century to usher in an era of an "enlightened" world. The word "enlightenment" to me, as a Buddhist, brings with it a vision of a world of Metta, Karuna, Mudita, Upekkha, which mean loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Let us all unite our efforts to make this world a peaceful world.

Footnotes

1. UNESCO Statistical yearbook, 1997 (Year 2000 projection)
2. UNESCO Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy, 1995 (Year 2000 projection)

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